



## Great Expectations

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players in terms of helping them fulfill their course conditioning goals? Even more importantly, can a happy medium be established between players and superintendents that will make the overall playing experience better for everyone?

### The best of conditions, the worst of conditions

We've established that the golf-on-TV phenomena has pushed player expectations of course conditions beyond reality. But when a golfer has to pay between \$100 and \$300 for a round, it's understandable for that person to expect the course to provide the experience of a lifetime.

"The more golfers pay, the more they expect good conditions, especially the greens," says Art Stipo, a dedicated Myrtle Beach golfer. "At places like Tidewater GC or the Dunes Golf and Beach Club (in Myrtle Beach), they can charge \$150 if they have a good design, are in good shape and have smooth, fast greens. But the same courses not in good shape because of weather or whatever may only be worth \$100, and if they're aerated or overseeded should only be worth \$50. But these courses still want to charge their prime rates of \$150 — no matter what."

But for many players, good conditions within the playing areas on the course and overall consistency from hole to hole take precedence over perfection.

"I want the tee boxes, fairways and greens on the courses I play to look great, and I want to know what to expect on every hole in terms of green speed and fairway conditions," says Doug Carey, while walking off the 18th green at the Golf Club at Vistoso in Tucson, Ariz. "I'm not as concerned with the rough, the fringe and the areas of the course that are technically out of play."

### It all starts at the greens

For many players, course conditions directly translate into green conditions — it's one of the great ironies of amateur golf. Your average golfer talks about nothing but the condition of the greens at the course he or she just played. But if you ask what the person spends time working on at the practice range, chances are it's not putting.

Nevertheless, greens are the showcase of any course — upscale or municipal. Why the obsessions? Perhaps it's the work it takes to maintain greens, or that discussing greens makes for an easy topic of conversation. After all, greens are easy to encapsulate at the 19th hole or over the phone with a golfing friend.

"In golf chat rooms that I visit, the discussion is dominated by talk about the greens," says Bruce Harper, head pro at River's Edge GC in Shallotte, N.C. "But watch any beginner at the range and all he or she wants to hit is the dri-

ver. People don't tie the two together — green conditions and being a good putter."

Not only do players expect pristine putting conditions, they are often unwilling to contribute to the maintenance of greens, even if it only requires bending over and fixing a ball mark. How many times have you approached the most striking green you have ever laid eyes on, only to be taken back by the sheer number of unrepaired ball marks when you get a closer look?

"Some groups tend to have a mentality that they paid such and such amount to play out here, and that ball marks come with the territory," says Scott Devaux, assistant pro at the Legends in Myrtle Beach. "I would like to think that's not the case, but sometimes it's true."

But are players doing it out of spite for having paid so much to play, or are they doing it just because they don't know any better?

### Course etiquette

Each year, golf lures new players into its lair with its irresistible charms. The upside of this trend is that quality golf courses are being built at a record pace, competition is leading to lower greens fees in some regions and the nation is more aware of one of life's great games.

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The downside is that the definition of "average golfer" has suffered more than a Chicago Cubs fan. Simply put, most golfers are bad, and unfortunately, so is their knowledge of course etiquette. So what can superintendents do to educate the growing golf masses as to how to take care of a golf course?

"All the professional golfers on (the PGA) tour treat the course right, they replace their divots and fix their ball marks and they are getting paid millions of dollars," says Greg Plotner, vice president of operations at International Golf Maintenance in Lakeland, Fla.

Maybe the answer lies with watching more golf on television, when unrealistic expectations about course conditions are often attributed to the perfectly manicured layouts displayed through the cameras of ESPN and CBS.

"It would help if networks showed more etiquette going on in tournaments," says Wally Dowe, superintendent at the Lodge at Ventana Canyon in Tucson. "If the cameras showed a caddy raking a bunker or if there was a segment during the tournament on course etiquette, that could help tremendously."

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## Great Expectations

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Picture David Feherty clamoring around in a bunker, raking sand and cracking jokes, or Gary McCord scrambling around a green repairing ball marks. Dowe just may be onto something.

And high-tech solutions for player education only starts with TV. Sam Green, director of golf operations at the Dataw Island GC near Beaufort, S.C., is tapping into his club's Intranet Web site to get the word out about course conditions and maintenance at his private golfing venue. But still, Green is not above using good old-fashioned meetings and newsletters to inform members regarding course improvements and topdressings.

"I have a good membership, as long as I educate them," he says.

### Seeking common ground

So there remains hope that golf on TV hasn't completely warped expectations about course conditions, and there's even a glimmer of hope that golf on TV could serve to better educate players how to make superintendents' jobs easier.

Some players may spend half their paychecks to play a round on a high-end daily-fee course and expect to come face to face with perfection on each hole, yet many golfers are just

seeking good conditions and consistency. In sum, is it more likely that the L.A. Clippers will win an NBA title or that players and superintendents will see eye to eye on exactly what golf courses should look like?

"If I had that solution, I don't think I would be sitting here today," says Terry Todd, superintendent at the Golf Club at Vistoso. "Most players that play these type of (upscale) courses don't have good etiquette, and someone needs to teach them how to fix balls marks. Junior golf is getting bigger, but somehow the public needs to be better educated. Maybe superintendents as an organization should be out there trying to educate them more."

Maybe. But it's tough for superintendents to be running around giving five-minute seminars when they're expected to be tending to their masterpieces. And shouldn't players beyond the junior golf level take it upon themselves to get educated about course conditioning and maintenance? Or could it be that course etiquette won't be a problem once the learning curve catches up with the legion of new golfers?

Better yet, maybe the intense competition for the golfing dollar could push all courses towards conditioning perfection.

Nice idea, but take your chances on the Clippers. ■

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*Sharp is a golf writer from Myrtle Beach, S.C., and is editor-in-chief of TravelGolf.com.*

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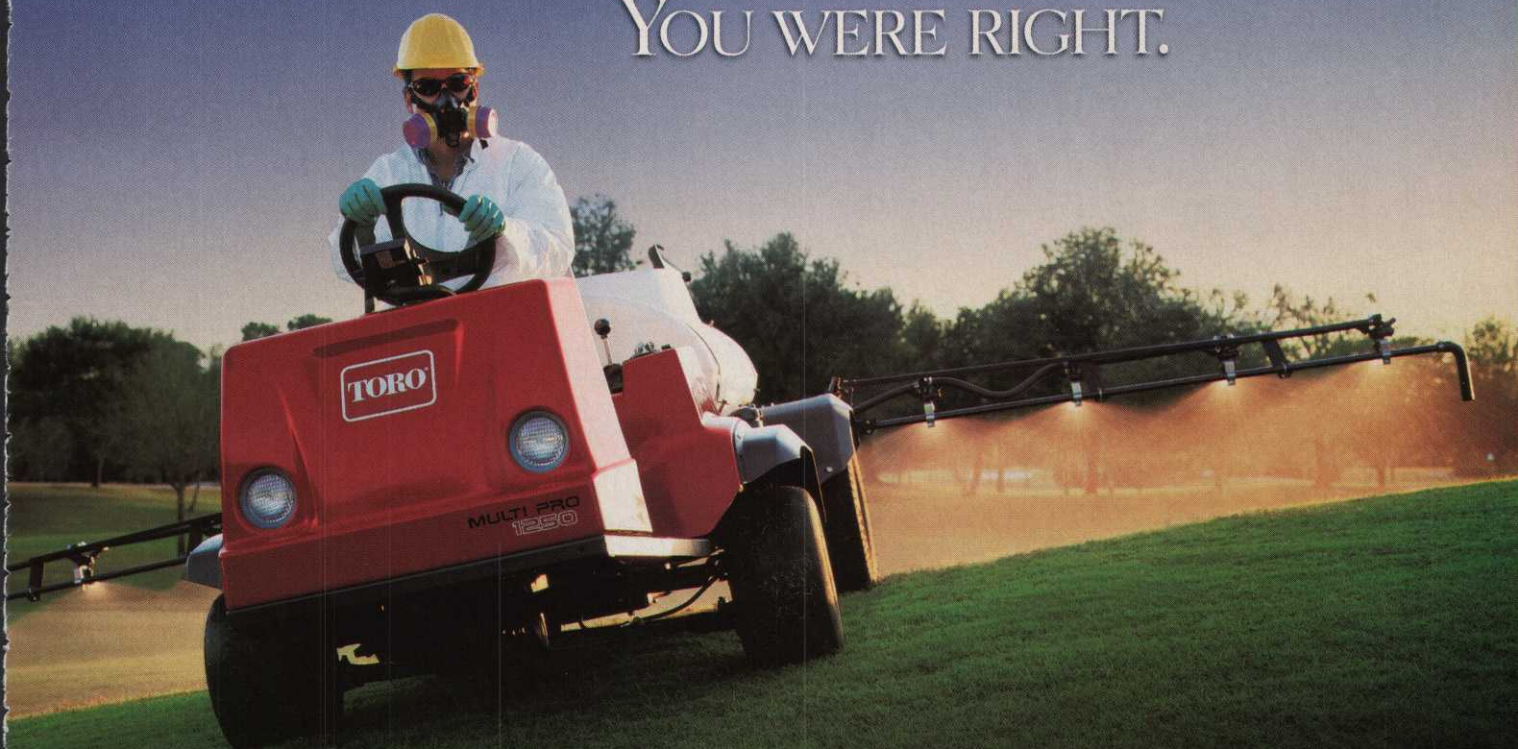
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# Do Tell

If *you* don't tell golfers what you do, chances are they'll never know

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR.,  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

**T**homas Martinek views his superintendent's office at Shaker Heights CC in Shaker Heights, Ohio, as a quick-response center. He's armed with communication tools of the information age to educate golfers about course maintenance before he finds a group of angry golfers on his doorstep wanting to know why something was done.

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## COMMUNICATION, NATURALLY

Nature provides pleasure and pain for most golfers. While it can cause a horrible round, it also provides a magnificent background for sport. For Glenn Smickley, superintendent at the RTJ Club in Manassas, Va., nature allows him an additional opportunity to communicate with golfers.

Smickley's club was the first certified member of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses in Virginia, and he uses the certification to bond with golfers. He designed a program that includes putting up signs on each tee alerting golfers to the wildlife they might see on the course. Other signs talk about the trees near the tee and highlight wildflower growth. Whatever the subject, the signs get golfers talking about the course's environmental aspects.

"Golf courses have an image problem to overcome as far as being friendly to the environment," Smickley says. "When you work as hard as we have to be environmentally friendly, you want to make the most of it."

Meadows and naturalized areas dot the course and provide a habitat for a variety of wildlife, Smickley says. By bringing the attention of golfers to these additional amenities of the course, it provides a more complete experience for them.

Because golfers at the RTJ Club are more aware of their effect on the balance Smickley hopes to achieve, they take better care of the course.

The RTJ Club has become such a model neighbor, that Manassas recently allowed another golf course to be built in the area — as long as it followed the model of Smickley's environmentally friendly course.

"Good word of mouth is the best way to promote a course among golfers," Smickley says. "Our program has certainly done that."

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Newsletters, e-mails, a hotline dedicated to informing golfers about course conditions before they arrive — Martinek uses all these tools and more to enlighten golfers about greens aeration, storm damage or a major renovation project.

"You want to give your golfers as much information in as many different forms as possible," Martinek says. "If you give them enough communication outlets, they can customize the way they want to get course information."

Communicating with golfers can be trying at times, and it seems like it's all superintendents can do not to throttle the next golfer who asks why golf cars can't be driven on the fairways after a heavy rain or why a crew member is topdressing the greens. With a little practice, however, superintendents can turn communicating with golfers into a productive procedure.

Martinek says pictures are a vital part of

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## TALE OF THE TAPES

It all started when Jim Becker was supervising the filming of an instructional video for superintendents as part of the Superintendent Video Magazine series of educational videos. A superintendent on hand asked Becker, president of West Bend, Wis.-based EPIC of Wisconsin, why there were no videos to teach golfers how to treat a course.

"I didn't have a good answer for him," Becker says. "We kept talking,

and at the end of our conversation, I decided that EPIC should create such a program."

Becker returned to the office armed with 12 topics for future videos, including fixing ball marks, fixing divots, raking bunkers and other turf etiquette topics. The standard tapes run between four and five minutes and can run on a continuous loop in

the pro shop. The ballmark repair video in particular has proved popular, Becker says.

"At some of the high-end courses, they have crew members whose sole job from about

noon until the close of play is to get out on the course and fix ball marks," Becker says. "If clubs can educate golfers on the proper way to do it themselves, that will save a lot of time and labor."

In addition to the standard program, some private courses have requested personalized videos with specific rules designed for their courses, Becker says. The videos cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000 to shoot an eight- to 12-minute tape, but for a club with 500 members, it's a small price to pay to have more educated golfers.

"That's only \$15 to \$20 per member," Becker says.



EPIC of Wisconsin's golfer videos were inspired by their SVM program.

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his communication arsenal. For example, when he built a new bridge this past winter, he chronicled the project from start to finish with his digital camera, and he keeps the photos on his computer where he can access them on a moment's notice. Martinek understands there will be golfers who haven't visited the course since the fall who will want to know about the bridge.

"With the pictures, I'll be able to com-

municate in a few minutes what it might take me hours to communicate otherwise," Martinek says. "Use photos whenever you have to help golfers understand what you do."

Building relationships with golfers is an essential part of the job, says Mike Mumper, superintendent at Park Ridge CC in Park Ridge, Ill.

Golfers will be more willing to listen to the superintendent's point of view when problems arise if the superintendent has made the effort to build trust with them.

"Part of a superintendent's job is to educate golfers about what they do," Mumper says. "You have to be visible, and you've got to build relationships."

Mumper says he writes a column in the club's monthly newsletter dealing with course

## ALL A-BOARD!

Lynn Richert, superintendent of Angushire GC in St. Cloud, Minn., thinks her maintenance staff should act as greeters at the clubhouse door as golfers come in to receive their tee times.

Naturally, Richert realizes that with a 9-hole executive course to care for, such duties would be difficult, if not impossible, to do in person. So at the suggestion of an assistant, Richert developed the next best thing in 1995 — a poster covered with photographs of each member of the maintenance staff on a piece of equipment. The board is prominently posted as club members walk in the door.

"Our golfers almost certainly knew the faces of most of our maintenance crew



members, but it was hard for them to put names with faces," Richert says. "With this photo board, it helps the golfers feel more at ease with the crew members when they're on the course."

Photographing the staff in action also conditions members to see what the maintenance staff does every day, Richert says. It creates a sense of community that wouldn't normally exist.

"Golfers often stand in front of the board for quite a while when they come in and study the faces intently," Richert says. "It has created more of a connection because the staff members are human beings to our members now, not just people out there on mowers and aerators. It starts what we hope will be an ongoing conversation between the maintenance staff and the golfers."

Richert says the feedback on the board has been positive from members, who now feel as if they can approach the crew members on the course to ask questions about what they're doing. This interaction leads to a better understanding for golfers about the maintenance practices and why they are necessary.

The pictures are placed on a colored piece of poster board and then placed in a frame, Richert says. The cost of the effort is minimal, but the reward of helping everyone get to know each other is invaluable in the long run.

**"If you give (golfers) enough communication outlets, they can customize the way they want to get course information."**

THOMAS MARTINEK

maintenance issues. He says he uses humor to make complicated maintenance issues easier for golfers to understand. He also makes sure that his presentations to the green committee are always professional.

While appearances aren't everything, affluent golfers who are accustomed to top-notch written presentations in their businesses expect the same from superintendents. Mumper said he put together a 10-year equipment plan that would have looked at home in any corporate boardroom.

Jim Becker, president of West Bend, Wis.-based EPIC of Wisconsin, says superintendents must earn golfers' respect as people before they can expect respect for what they do.

"Superintendents know how hard they work, but the vast majority of golfers do not,"

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